



## **Russian NGO is Fighting to Lift the Ban on Its Website**

**For immediate release!**

*Moscow, April 3*

***The Andrey Rylkov Foundation, an HIV prevention NGO in Moscow addressed the Russian drug czar in an open letter and demands the respect of its right to freedom of expression***

The Russian NGO, the Andrey Rylkov Foundation (ARF) is the first and only non-governmental organization in Moscow that provides sterile needles and syringes to injecting drug users and is the strongest advocate for drug users human rights including the right to health. In a country where the HIV epidemic is largely driven by the sharing of used injecting equipment, the government does not only deny funding for this activity but, in February 2012, it banned the website of the NGO. The Federal Drug Control Service accused the ARF of spreading "drug propaganda", that is, advocating the use of an opiate substitute medicine, methadone. Opiate substitution therapy, an internationally recognized and widely used form of treatment that reduces crimes, deaths and disease, is banned in Russia. The banning of the website outraged several international organizations, including the International AIDS Society, UNAIDS and Human Rights Watch. However, in answering questions at a press conference in Vienna last month, Mr. Ivanov said he is not considering lifting the ban, moreover, this time he did not only accuse ARF of advocating methadone treatment but of distributing methadone itself.

*"We assume that you either had not been fully informed about the situation when you made this statement, or it was delivered through some kind of mistake. Of course, our website didn't distribute methadone. You have accused us of a very serious crime, which damaged our reputation, especially since your statement was made at a major international forum,"* pointed out Anya Sarang, ARF President in her open letter to Mr. Ivanov. She invited the Russian drug czar to hold a press conference together to explain their different positions on substitution treatment and clarify the situation.

Previously, ARF has also submitted a law suit in order to seek justice in re-opening the web-site as we believe its closure is a grave violation not only of the right to freedom of expression, but also the right to enjoy the benefits of scientific progress and its application; and the right to the highest attainable standard of physical and mental health. However, in the case of false accusations, ARF believes that Mr. Ivanov's statement was made by a mistake and the situation can be improved by a public statement correcting that mistake.

This week the ARF is launching a campaign to raise funds to buy a mobile van to reach disadvantaged young people on the streets of Moscow. The campaign, supported by Global Giving, calls attention to the lack of targeted interventions to prevent HIV among drug users in the Russian capital. „*If it wasn't for harm reduction, I don't know if I would still be alive. Today I help other drug users to protect themselves. Everyone should have access to lifesaving services, and a chance to live,*” says Maxim Malyshev, a peer outreach worker at ARF.

A documentary movie about ARF:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PLVGzKqCLqM>

A movie about the drug czar's accusation: <http://drogriporter.hu/en/helpARF>

The fund raising website:

<http://www.globalgiving.org/projects/moscow-health-for-1000-drug-users/>

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